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Las Mujeres
Voices from the Borderlands

In 1800, 7-year-old Apolinaria Lorenzana and her mother stepped off the ship *Concepción* onto the docks of Monterey, members of a manifest of orphans and potential wives sent by the Spanish colonial government in Mexico to the far-flung province of Alta California. As an elderly woman, Lorenzana remembered:

> Upon our arrival in Monterey, the governor distributed some of the children like puppies ... I remained with my mother and various other women ... Those that were already women, Francisca and Pascuala, were married very soon ... My mother also married an artilleryman.

Civil authorities and mission priests had high expectations for these shipboard brides. They would bear children, Catholic citizens of New Spain, and contribute their physical labor for the welfare of their kin and of their settlements. As historian Antonia Castañeda has so skillfully argued, colonial officials believed that increasing the numbers of women from Mexico would curb the rapaciousness of soldiers toward native women. While priests were truly alarmed by the sexual assaults on indigenous women, they themselves "relied heavily on corporal punishment in their programs to Christianize and Hispanicize native people." Settler women who worked at the missions, like Apolinaria Lorenzana, held dialectical roles as conqueror and *comadre*.

Diaries, memoirs, oral narratives, letters, photographs, and ecclesiastical records are among the array of materials illuminating the lives of Spanish-speaking women who journeyed to the Spanish colonial borderlands or Mexican North as early as the 16th century. This brief essay offers insights into women's roles in the initial settlement of the borderlands. It focuses particularly on women's roles inside the mission and their interactions across race, class, and social location, and highlights interpretive materials on women's lives at the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park.

Beginning with the Coronado expedition of 1540, Spanish-speaking women migrated north decades—even centuries—before their Euroamerican counterparts ventured west. The Spanish colonial government, trying to secure its territorial claims, offered many material inducements to those willing to undertake such an arduous and frequently perilous journey. The Don Manuel Angel de Villegas Puente records delineate the range of equipment and supplies furnished by the government to a band of settlers bound for San Antonio. These subsidies included not only provisions, gunpowder, and livestock, but also petticoats, silk stockings, and *rebozos*.

Throughout the borderlands, the colonists themselves were typically mestizos or mulattos. Juan Agustín Morfi referred to "Spanish colonists in Texas as a 'ragged crew of all colors.'" According to historian Quintard Taylor, over one-half of the founding families of Los Angeles were of African or part-African ancestry. In northern California, the three heads of households who qualified for land, rations, and other subsidies as settlers to San José included a mulatto, an Apache, and a Spaniard. Baptismal registers and other records bear out the racial heterogeneity of those who journeyed into hinterlands of the Mexican North.

Few women ventured north as widows or orphans. Most arrived as the wives or daughters of soldiers, farmers, and artisans. Over the course of three centuries, they raised families on the frontier and worked alongside their fathers or husbands, herding cattle and tending crops. These pioneer women also participated in the day-to-day operation of area missions. The missions, particularly in California and Texas, played instrumental roles in the economic development of the area and in the acculturation (and decimation) of indigenous peoples. As historians Antonio Ríos-Bustamante and Pedro Castillo explain:

> While the primary rationale for the mission system was salvation of heathen souls, Franciscan-run frontier centers also served more earthly objectives: they effectively concentrated and contained potentially hostile Indian people in an environment of social indoctrination and acculturation. What's more, they allowed for the formation, training, and control of a relatively large Indian labor force capable of producing foodstuffs, materials, and furnished products for official purposes.

With all these functions in mind, it is not surprising to find that the Franciscans recruited women, like Eulalia Pérez and Apolinaria Lorenzana into their service. As "housekeeper" of Mission San Gabriel, Eulalia Pérez was responsible for the preparation of meals, the allotment of rations, and the manufacture of soap, olive oil, and wine. She taught Indian women to sew in the Spanish fashion, practiced midwifery and folk medicine, and acted as a quartermaster, controlling the flow of goods inside and outside the mission walls. Pérez also distributed food and clothing to neighboring troops and sewed the garments worn by mission vaqueros. In her spare time, she dipped chocolates and bottled lemonade. When the workload overwhelmed the energetic widow and her five daughters, the padre hired women from nearby Los Angeles to help with the sewing.

Apolinaria Lorenzana handled similar responsibilities at Mission San Diego. In addition to her work as a healer, she cared for the church sacristy and priestly vestments. She cut out silhouettes and embroidered for soldiers and townspeople. Lorenzana supervised the work of Indian seamstresses and served as a general clerk, boarding ships to obtain supplies needed for the mission. She also operated an informal school for the daughters of settlers. Her own education demonstrates the resourcefulness characteristic of Spanish-speaking frontier women. "When I was a young woman in California, I learned alone to write, using for this the books I saw, imitating the letters on whatever white paper I found discarded. Thus I succeeded in learning enough to make myself understood in writing ..."

Women had their own worlds of influence rooted in female networks based on ties of consanguine and fictive kinship. Historian Helen Lara Cea brings out the "lay ministry" role of women settlers who, as midwives to mission neophytes, baptized sickly or still-born babies. As godmothers for these infants, they established the bonds of *comadrazgo* between indigenous and Spanish/Mexican women. Acculturation was not a one-way street. Spanish-speaking women, such as Eulalia Pérez, adopted many of the herbal remedies used by indigenous peoples.

For women in domestic service, racial and class hierarchies undermined any pretense of a shared sisterhood. In San Antonio, Texas, in 1735, Antonia Lusgardia Ernandes sued her former patrón for custody of their son. Her testimony, now housed at the Barker History Center, bears witness to the conditions of servitude:

> I, Antonia Lusgardia Ernandes, a free mulatta residing in the presidio, do hereby appear before your Lordship in the best form according to law and my own interests and state that about eight or nine years ago I entered the home of Don Miguel Nuñes Morillo, taking a daughter of mine with me. I entered the said home without any salary whatever and while I was working in the said home of Don Miguel Nuñes I suffered so much from lack of clothing and from mistreatment of my humble person that I left the said house and went to home of Alberto López, taking two children with me, one of whom I had when I entered the home of the said Don Miguel and another which I gave birth to in his home. Just for this reason, and because his wife baptized the said creature, he, exercising absolute power, snatched away from me my son—the only man I have and the one who I hope will eventually support me. He took him from the house where I live and carried him to his own, I being but a poor, helpless woman whose only protection is a good administration and a good judicial system. Your Lordship will please demand that the said Don Miguel Nuñes, without the least delay, shall proceed to deliver my son to me without making any excuses. I wish to make use of all the laws in my favor, and of Your Lordship, as a father and protector of the poor and helpless, as well as anything else which might be in my favor ....

Admitting paternity, Don Miguel Nuñes Morillo claimed that his former servant had relinquished the child to his wife. The court, however, remanded custody of the child to Ernandes on the condition that she give her son "a proper home." Under these circumstances, the sacrament of baptism did little to promote women's networks across class and race.

The Ernandes case seemed exceptional in that a servant had challenged her former master in court. Indentured servitude was prevalent on the colonial frontier. Historian Ramón Gutiérrez persuasively argues that captive Indians pressed into bondage by New Mexican colonists formed their own caste. After serving their time, these *genízaros* (or detribalized peoples) created their own communities separate from the colonists. Indentured and domestic service brought out the fissures marking colonial society. However, women's interactions across race and social location did not necessarily revolve around a mistress/maid relationship.

Another intriguing piece of evidence is a letter written by Rosita Rodrígues, a native of San Antonio, to her father in 1846. It offers a glimpse into the relationships among Mexican women and Native Americans. In her words:

> I remained a prisoner among the Comanche Indians about one year during which time I was obliged to work very hard, but was not otherwise badly treated as I was the property of (an older woman) who became much attached to me and would not allow me to be ill-treated. My little boy Incarnación is still a prisoner among the comanches. I heard from him a short time ago—he was well and hearty but he is pure Indian now ....

Bonded labor cut both ways, but as the above letter indicates, tribal adoption could soften the situation. The work of historian James Brooks illustrates how "captives" became "cousins" through the exchanges of women and children between Spanish/Mexican colonists and indigenous peoples.

The *comadre* relationship, whether established through the sacrament of baptism or the rite of tribal adoption, could foster ties between mestizo and mulatto colonists and Native Americans. "Class," as defined by a shared lifestyle, served to bridge differences in culture and social location. This pattern also holds up when examining fictive kinship within the walls of the California missions where soldier and settler wives baptized indigenous infants. The elites, with the seigneurial world view, used baptism as a way of social control whereas mestizos and Indians conferred a more policratic meaning to baptism and adoption.

Engendering borderlands history has begun, a past shaped by men and women of diverse cultures and unequal power.

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